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THE ART OF FORGETTING

LONG, long ago, when the world was still young, when people believed rather in fairies than in protoplasm, and put more trust in elves than in the comma bacillus, we all possessed the wonderful art of forgetting. We forgot then as easily and as charmingly as a child that smiles while its eyes are still wet with tears, and whose yesterdays hold no goblins of remorse and regret. With other good things this art is now almost lost, and we are cursed with an unpitying, relentless memory. We have forgotten how to forget, and in our darkest hours we break down, not under the strain of the moment, but under the added burden of an unforgotten past. Even the knowledge, the consciousness of this most delightful art is gone, and though there are many text-books to teach mankind, unhappy enough, to be sure, the Science of Memory, nobody has ever been trained in the Art of Forgetting.

And yet, there is such an art. In old fairy-tales one finds the story of the invisible kingdom which, tied up in a white handkerchief, Peter and his bride receive from a nice little leprechawn. The whole week they sit in their half tumble-down hut and work like other peasants, but on Sunday they open their handkerchief, they spread out their little kingdom, and are enthroned there as king and queen in all the glory and grandeur their hearts can wish. These two possessed the art of forgetting. They forgot their dark and dreary home, their hard and hopeless life, the black yesterdays and the gray morrows, and in forgetting they found the land of their heart's delight, and after

they had tasted so many bitter draughts, now they were allowed to have a sip out of the wonder wells of Arcady.

To be happy one has to forget. If we were constantly facing the futility of our days, the doom awaiting us, the mistakes we have made, the wrong paths we have taken, the aims we have missed, we could not live another day. But as long as we forget, the bitterness in our heart is charmed away as David charmed away the gloom of Saul with his lute, and once more we look upon life and fate with the trust of a child and believe that what is, is good. And, really, our heart is only too willing to forget. Out of the dark waters of pain and despair we emerge and, seeing a blue sky and white fleecy clouds, the smiling sunshine and the proud and patient trees, we forget at once the terror of the depths. Once more we belong to life and life belongs to us. We forget, because we find only in forgetting the possibility to be, to live on. The spiritual rebirth, the most precious gift the church offers the repentant sinner, what is it but the possibility, the right, to forget our sins and to begin once more, happily and gallantly, a new life and a new day with a fine disregard of a past which we have outlived.

To be strong, one has to forget. The very moment we do not remember our weakness, this weakness does not exist. A paralytic, threatened by a fire, suddenly starts to walk. He forgot that his limbs obey him no more, because a stronger interest, the interest to save his life, replaced this memory, and lo, he walks. If we could but for one moment

forget the laws of gravity, surely we could fly, just as in our dreams, when we easily and automatically forget, and when all inhibitions are blotted from our mind, we rise lightly and gracefully into the air and look smilingly down upon bonds that have fettered us too long. But, unluckily, the laws of gravity refuse to be forgotten, just as certain other things, buried deep in our heart, will always come back with the same old pain, even if we have become very clever in our difficult art and have learned to forget what it hurts to remember.

To love, one has to forget, and it is perhaps the mystery and the strength of a great love that one can steadfastly and persistently forget what others disapprovingly and reproachfully remember. If one ceases to forget, love ceases, and if we are told that love, is blind, we, who know better, can smile wistfully. In truth, love is not blind but master in the art of forgetting;—of forgetting pains, disappointments, hurts, and slights; knowing only to love on,—a marvel to others who foolishly pride themselves that they never forget.

And even to remember—to remember rightly and truly—one has to forget. If we actually remembered everything, we should practically remember nothing, because we would be swamped and drowned in a mass of confusing details, and our rebuilding memory would stand hopeless before the task of uniting all these bits into a clear and convincing picture. But if we know how to forget, if we do not cling to facts like a frightened swimmer to the pole, but drive with a fine and strong stroke forward into the deep, blue, alluring waters to a new and beckoning spiritual shore, then we shall see what we

have forgotten coming back to us, clearer and purer, deeper and fuller with meaning, all the incidental details gone, but the essential picture heightened and more ours now than ever before.

Yes, the art of forgetting is a fine and delicate art, and we should try to become adepts in it. Unfortunately, it is an accomplishment which is quite overlooked in the curriculum of our schools. Perhaps it is an art that comes to us only with years. Youth is too impatient, too much dependent on realities, too much concerned with the actual to be able to forget really and truthfully. But the older we get the more we learn of our art, and the wisest and kindest of us, those to whom the ripening years bring mellowness and sweetness and a deeper understanding, know well how to forget, and that saves them the trouble to forgive. They choose the better and the less humiliating way, they know how to keep friendship with themselves, with life and their fellowmen; they forget.

And therefore I do not believe than in our last hour we remember our whole life again. I think that then we are gone too far on the way to light to do so foolish and useless a thing. I rather fondly believe that at the door of heaven St. Peter is waiting for us, such as I know him from the picture-books of my childhood—a giant bunch of keys in his hands, jolly, good-humored, a little fat, and smiling invitingly—and if an unwise, peevish, and resentful soul were really to come to him with a tale of earthly woes, the dear Saint would certainly counsel with his irresistible, half-saintly, half-boyish smile, “Forget it,” and in view of all the beatitudes of heaven, surely, surely, forget we shall.

ELISABETH VINČENT.
From *Wiener Rundschau*, Vienna.
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